

The learning curve in the South African War: Soldiers' perspectives

Edward M. Spiers*

If the South African War (1899–1902) proved the supreme test for the late Victorian army, many writers taking their cue from the “lucidity and brilliance” of Leo Amery’s writings in *The Times History* accepted that the army, particularly in the Natal campaign, failed to measure up. The generalship of Sir Redvers Buller, VC, his staff, and the regimental officers and other ranks, all incurred withering criticism. The pre-war army, wrote Amery, was “largely a sham”, and the home army, in particular, was “nothing more or less than a gigantic Dotheboys Hall” (an allusion to the notorious academy in *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens):

Neither in skill with the rifle, nor in individual intelligence and initiative, nor in physical and moral endurance, was the British soldier equal to the terribly exacting demands of modern warfare¹

Modern historiography has done much to correct the exaggerations of Amery’s work and to modify the interpretations of an author determined to promote army reform by illustrating the “supreme military incapacity” of Buller in contrast to the “clearness of vision, undaunted resolution, and boundless energy” of his successor as commander-in-chief in South Africa, Lord Frederick S. Roberts, VC.² Without lapsing into a defence of Buller,³ this paper will take the correction further by reflecting upon the shock and early impact of the war upon the British soldier, the slow process of his adaptation in the field, and the signs of a “learning curve” perceived by British soldiers as they eventually prevailed in the conflict.⁴

The shock and impact of the South African War upon the British soldier has normally been expressed in two fundamental respects: first, that the British soldiers had learned little from defeat in the Anglo-Transvaal War (1880–81) and that they underestimated an enemy, often depicted as mere farmers; and secondly, that they

* The author is the professor of Strategic Studies at the University of Leeds. He has written seven books on the Victorian and Edwardian armies, most recently *The Scottish Soldier and Empire, 1854–1902* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006). This article has been prepared with the assistance of a grant to Fransjohan Pretorius (Department of Historical and Heritage Studies, University of Pretoria) from the National Research Foundation.

1 L. Amery (ed), *The Times History of The War in South Africa 1899–1902*, 7 vols (Sampson Low, Marston & Co, London, 1900–1909), III, p 298; Amery, *Times History*, II, pp 33, 40; J Symons, *Buller’s Campaign* (Cresset Press, London, 1963), p xi; B. Farwell, *The Great Boer War* (Allen Lane, London, 1976), pp 136, 138, 166–167, 232.

2 L. S. Amery, *My Political Life*, 3 vols (Hutchinson, London, 1953–55), I, pp 187–192; on the historiography of the war, see I. F. W. Beckett, “Early Historians and the South African War”, *Sandhurst Journal of Military Studies*, 1, 1990, pp 15–32; I. F. W. Beckett, “The South African War and the Late Victorian Army”, in P. Dennis and J. Grey (eds), *The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire* (Army History Unit, Canberra, 2000), pp 31–44.

3 T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1979), p 457.

4 On the notion of a “learning curve”, I acknowledge my debt to G. Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War, Myths and Realities* (Headline, London, 2001) and suggest that the notion of the British army learning in the midst of a long war had a precedent in South Africa. See also J. Stone and E. A. Schmidl, *The Boer War and Military Reforms* (University Press of America, Lanham, New York, London, 1988), pp 79–101.

came to South Africa ill-equipped to engage in modern warfare. If there is much truth in the first observation, the second is debatable and the element of shock in either case derives from the immense self-confidence and high esteem with which British soldiers came to South Africa whether from the United Kingdom or from India.

Under-estimation was apparent in the pre-war texts, notably Colonel Callwell's famous description of the Boers as well-armed, educated and led by men of knowledge and repute but "merely bodies of determined men, acknowledging certain leaders, drawn together to confront a common danger".⁵ Conversely, the small and poorly funded War Office Intelligence Department, though heavily criticised during the war, had "remarkably accurate" intelligence on the military capacity of the Boers. It had warned that war was likely, that the Orange Free State would probably join the Transvaal, and that the Boers would enjoy a numerical superiority at the outset, but the department under Major-General Sir John Ardagh was neither involved in the pre-war strategic planning nor consulted by Buller when he received command of the army corps bound for South Africa (lest it compromise the secrecy of his plans).⁶ Lieutenant-General William F. Butler, the pre-war commander of forces in South Africa, was also renowned for his fears of any "war between the white races", which he dubbed as "the greatest calamity"⁷ that would ever occur in South Africa, but he was in a small minority. Few regular soldiers in 1899 shared his pessimism and early arrivals in Natal evinced supreme confidence: "We are all in grand condition", wrote Corporal G.H. Spence (1st Leicestershire) "and hope to wipe all of the troubles out, and we have the men to do it".⁸ The Boers, opined an officer in the Gordon Highlanders, "won't have much of a look in after our Army Corps comes out from home. I hope we don't wait till then ...".⁹ Even after the reverses of "Mournful Monday" (30 October 1899), and the onset of the siege of Ladysmith, Captain Archibald Cameron (2nd battalion, Black Watch), serving in the army corps, assumed that Sir George White would "easily" hold on in Ladysmith and hence "that the original programme will be kept to & that there will be very little left for us to do".¹⁰

In the early months of the war, underestimation was all too apparent even if the Boers failed to benefit as much as they might have done from their foreign contacts, and only engaged the services of some two thousand foreigners. Lieutenant-Colonel Edward S. May, the professor of Military Art and History at the Staff College, acknowledged in retrospect that:

There has probably never been a more striking example of a foe being underrated than has been given to the world of late in South Africa ... each and every one of [our] assertions has been shown to have been untrustworthy, and every canon by which the

-
- 5 Colonel CE Callwell, *Small War: A Tactical Textbook for Imperial Soldiers* (HMSO, London, 1896), p 27
 - 6 Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP), *Report of His Majesty's Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Military Preparations and Other Matters Connected with the War in South Africa* (hereafter referred to as the *Elgin Report*), Cd 1789 (1904), 40, pp 128–129; and Minutes of Evidence to the *Elgin Commission*, Cd 1791 (1904), 41, q 15056
 - 7 W F Butler, *Sir William Butler, an Autobiography* (Constable, London, 1913), p 449
 - 8 "Leicester Man's Letter from the Front", *Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury*, 28 October 1899, p 5
 - 9 "The Gordons at Ladysmith", *Daily Free Press* (Aberdeen), 15 November 1899, p 6
 - 10 Black Watch Regimental Archive (hereafter BWRA), Capt A Cameron diary, 12 November 1899

potential strength of our opponents was gauged may be shown to have been misapplied¹¹

Was it further the case, as the official historian claimed, that “the British Army in 1899–1900 was dealing, as no European army had yet done, with the new conditions of war”?¹² This was only partially true. The British would encounter conditions of warfare in South Africa that were unprecedented in scale (and hence made unprecedented demands upon the command, staff work and reserves of manpower) but the British had faced the destructive effects of modern magazine rifles on the north-west frontier in 1897.¹³ They had also experimented with many facets of modern technology that would feature prominently in South Africa, the railway, telegraphs, aerial reconnaissance by balloon, electric illumination, X-rays and others.

Had they then simply failed to adapt their tactics to the new conditions of war, with British generals displaying in J.F.C. Fuller’s words, a “Brown Bess” or “Peninsular” mentality of “shoulder to shoulder formations, of volleys in rigid lines and of wall-like bayonet assaults”?¹⁴ As Ian Beckett has stated, this is simply nonsense. Modern historiography has demonstrated that the British army of the 1890s was grappling with the impact of modern technology, and emphasising the importance of greater flexibility in tactical thought and training. Howard Bailes even argues that the tactical blunders of 1899–1900 were “not a consequence of the Aldershot teaching of the 1890s”, but of a “failure to act in accordance with it”. Even with his caveat that the practical application of the new tactical ideas were at an early stage in 1899,¹⁵ this is possibly slightly extreme. Innovative ideas were appearing in pre-war drill books, largely in response to developments in firepower, and these included extended formations for infantry and dismounted action for cavalry (but only in five pages out of 450 in the 1898 edition of the *Cavalry Drill Book* and these were contrasted with “normal mounted action”). The tactical implications were still a matter of debate, and peacetime training was far from systematic, impaired by lack of financial support; space (until the manoeuvres of 1898); imperial dispersal producing a diverse experience for so many units; and the fitful interest of some senior commanders and regimental officers.¹⁶ It was not surprising that Viscount Wolseley’s many criticisms of the handling of front-line and support arms at the manoeuvres of 1898 (close order

-
- 11 E S May, *Retrospect on the South African War* (Sampson Low, Marston, London, 1901), pp 1–4; I van der Waag, “South Africa and the Boer Military System”, in Dennis and Grey (eds), *The Boer War*, pp 45–69; and D P McCracken, *MacBride’s Brigade: Irish Commandos in the Anglo-Boer War* (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1999)
- 12 F Maurice and M H Grant, *History of the War in South Africa*, 4 vols (Hurst & Blackett, London, 1906–10), II, p 204
- 13 T Moreman, “The British and Indian Armies and North-West Frontier Warfare, 1849–1914”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20, 1, 1992, pp 35–64
- 14 J F C Fuller, *The Last of the Gentlemen’s Wars* (Faber & Faber, London, 1937), p 20; W Baring Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer War* (Pan Books, London, 1969), p 200
- 15 H Bailes, “Technology and Tactics in the British Army, 1866–1900”, in R Haycock and K Neilson (eds), *Men, Machines and War* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo, 1988), pp 23–47 at p 46; Beckett, “The SA War and the Late Victorian Army”, pp 37–40; S Badsey, “The Boer War (1899–1902) and British Cavalry Doctrine: A Re-Evaluation”, *The Journal of Military History*, 71, 1, 2006, pp 75–97
- 16 H Bailes, “Patterns of Thought in the Late Victorian Army”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 4, 1, 1981, pp 29–45; E M Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army, 1868–1902* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992), chapter 9; I Beckett, *The Victorians at War* (Hambledon, London, 2003), p 190

formations, poor use of cover and neglect of scouting and reconnaissance)¹⁷ found reflection in South Africa. Nevertheless, in spite of the costly tactical errors, there were deployments in extended order, under Ian Hamilton's direction at Elandslaagte (21 October 1899) and Lord Methuen's at Belmont (23 November 1899), although the Highland Brigade was caught in the act of deploying at Magersfontein (11 December 1899). The cavalry also complemented its traditional tactics at Elandslaagte with an open-order charge at Klip Drift (15 February 1900) and a combination of mounted and dismounted action at Zand River (10 May 1900) and Diamond Hill (11 June 1900).¹⁸

Of more importance in explaining the shock of the early encounters in South Africa was the self-esteem of the arriving forces. These soldiers were basking in the reflected glory of Omdurman (2 September 1898), where one of the largest and most formidable African armies of the late nineteenth century had been annihilated in a morning. Then too, the storming of Dargai heights by the 1st battalion, Gordon Highlanders (20 October 1897) was an epic event celebrated across India, the United Kingdom, and by Caledonian societies across the empire, including those in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. Hugely celebrated feats of arms, they followed all the pageantry and military pomp of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (22 June 1897).¹⁹ British forces, in other words, left Britain and India highly motivated and confident: many expressed their gratitude for the enthusiastic crowds which gathered to send them off to war, with county pride in local regiments mingling with national patriotism. They appreciated, too, the receptions they received from English-speaking communities in South Africa, and the continuing support from local folk at home during the campaign (although a non-commissioned officer reported that three barrels of fish destined for the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry "dropped into the hands of De Wet").²⁰

Early encounters with the enemy dented this self-confidence. It soon dawned on British forces that they would have to do much more than check "raids" by a few thousand Boers, and that British forces were significantly outnumbered. They paid a heavy price for pre-war reticence about reinforcing the garrisons of the Cape Colony and Natal lest the reinforcements, and even the gathering of field intelligence by ten special service officers, might provoke a conflict had been partially offset by the despatch of 10 000 reinforcements, mainly from India. If the latter brought the forces in Natal up to 15 000 by mid-October, the Boers initially outnumbered the British soldiers in South Africa by at least 2 to 1 overall, and by 5 to 1 in mounted men. Even worse, the mal-deployment of forces in northern Natal exposed them to a pincer movement from the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, while the remaining Boers

17 PP, *Report on the Manoeuvres held in the Neighbourhood of Salisbury in August and September*, C 1939 (1899), 53, pp vii–ix, xii, xvii, pp 65–78

18 Badsley, "British Cavalry Doctrine", pp 90–92; Beckett, "The SA War and the Late Victorian Army", p 39; S M Miller, *Lord Methuen and the British Army* (Frank Cass, London, 2002), pp 93, 138

19 E M Spiers, "Campaigning under Kitchener", in E M Spiers (ed), *Sudan: The Reconquest Reappraised* (Frank Cass, London, 1998), pp 54–81; E M Spiers, *The Scottish Soldier and Empire, 1854–1902* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006), pp 120–128

20 "With the Dukes, how De Wet got the Luxuries", *Cornish Telegram*, 3 October 1900, p 6; "The Departure of the 'Dukes'", *Cornish Times*, 4 November 1899, p 4; "Letter from a North Devon Officer", *Western Times*, 18 December 1899, p 4; and "Christmas in Chieveley Camp; Graphic Account by a Taunton Man", *Somerset County Gazette*, 27 January 1900, p 3

operated across a broad front, investing the border towns of Kimberley and Mafeking by 14 October and Ladysmith by 2 November.²¹

Just as the scale of the war became increasingly apparent, so the demands of fighting a well-armed and highly mobile adversary, adept at the use of the ground, became ever more daunting. Crossing fire zones swept by smokeless, long-range, flat trajectory magazine rifles proved costly undertakings and resulted in heavy defeats: the three reverses of Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso – the “Black Week” of 10–15 December 1899 – and at Spion Kop (383 British deaths) as well as the costly victory at Paardeberg (348 deaths). By comparison with scale of losses in colonial wars since 1857, in which Britain had only thrice suffered more than 100 fatalities in a single action, these losses accounted for the considerable shock in the field and at home. As Major-General Neville Lyttelton observed,

Few people have seen two battles in succession in such startling contrast as Omdurman and Colenso. In the first 50 000 fanatics streamed across the open regardless of cover to certain death, while at Colenso I never saw a Boer all day till the battle was over, and it was our men who were the victims.²²

Soldiers were genuinely shocked by the new experience of battle. Many of the short-service soldiers were coming under fire for the first time and their experiences varied considerably. When advancing towards Kimberley, Trooper Alexander Groundwater (Royal Scots Greys) described it as “a very curious feeling to be under fire for the first time, and to hear the bullets flying past you ...”.²³ The earlier experience of Magersfontein (11 December 1899) was somewhat different: “My God I shall never forget it”, wrote Sergeant William Hamilton (1st battalion, Highland Light Infantry). “They knew all about our movements all along. I shall never forget the sight. It was like the mouth of hell opening up to swallow us.”²⁴ Even in victory, a battlefield was a ghastly spectacle. After Elandslaagte, wrote Colour Sergeant Lee (1st battalion, Devonshire Regiment):

The sights to behold would turn one cold, headless bodies, others disfigured, limbs lying about in all places, for our artillery made great work on the enemy. I found one poor fellow badly wounded and talking about his poor mother at home and it touched my heart, although he was one of the enemy, I can assure you, for they are white people like ourselves ... Yesterday all we had was water from three in the morning until seven at night, when we returned to our camp drenched to the skin, as it often rains here ... This won't be over I am sure for about another four months, as we have got no troops from England yet, and waiting for them badly.²⁵

Attitudes towards the enemy hardened. Having charged the Boers, shouting “Majuba, Majuba” at Elandslaagte,²⁶ soldiers now sought revenge for fallen comrades in this war and to have “another smack at Johnny Boer”.²⁷ They also deplored the

21 PP, *Elgin Report*, p 129; Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp 93–99, 118, 155; Van der Waag, “The Boer Military System”, pp 48–49; Maurice and Grant, *History of the War in South Africa*, II, p 206
22 N Lyttelton, *Eighty Years: Soldiering, Politics, Games* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1927), p 212; Pakenham, *Boer War*, p 572; Beckett, “The SA War and the Late Victorian Army”, p 33; Spiers, *Scottish Soldier*, p 92
23 “Letters from a Wells Man from the Front”, *Wells Journal*, 26 April 1900, p 5
24 “Letters from the Front”, *Argyllshire Herald*, 13 January 1900, p 3
25 “The Devos at Elandslaagte: A Colour Sergeant’s Experiences”, *Totnes Times*, 30 December 1899, p 8
26 Pakenham, *Boer War*, p 139
27 Gordon Highlanders Museum, PB 92, Private Ford, diary, 12 December 1899

ransacking of English homesteads by the Boers and the treatment of refugees fleeing the Transvaal: “The Boers are treating the women and children disgracefully”, wrote Lieutenant Archie Tringham from northern Natal, “starving them, abusing them etc.”²⁸ Some deprecated the Boer tactics, notably their readiness to withdraw from positions when under artillery fire or when threatened by a bayonet charge, their use of dum dum bullets and abuse (or reported abuse) of the white flag: “some of them”, wrote Major T. Mowbray Berkeley (2nd battalion, Black Watch), “are awful hounds”.²⁹ More perceptively Corporal Philip Littler, a Gordon Highlander invalided home to Halifax after Elandslaagte, remarked, “it is a mistake to look upon the Boers as poor ignorant farmers ... They will take some beating, and we shall want a lot more men over there, because we have such a wide area to cover”.³⁰

For some, the racial issue was decisive: “Of course these Boers we are fighting”, commented Private W. Jefferys (1st battalion, Devonshire Regiment), “are not like those Indian niggers; they are just the same as ourselves, white men, and it will be a great war before it is finished”.³¹ Others realised that the nature of war had changed fundamentally. Private E.S. Stagg (2nd battalion, Somerset Light Infantry) recognised that the British were not only fighting “a civilised white man” but also one armed with the “latest weapons of every description”, “all mounted”, and unwilling to engage “in open battle”.³² Gunner H. Lambert, like many others, commended the design and depth of the Boer trenches,³³ and a Devonian officer serving in Natal recognised:

What a lot they are teaching us, these farmers! When we have settled them we shall be the most magnificent army in the world ... Fighting begins at 3 000 yards You never see your enemy, even at 900 or 500; and the Boer is a busy fellow if he feels so inclined He will stay and fire 300 shots at you before you can clap your hands If he wants to go to a better place he will go, but you can't see him move Taking one consideration with another, the Dutchman is a fine enemy, and if he did not misuse the white flag he would be universally respected³⁴

Previous campaigns now paled by comparison. After Spion Kop (Spioenkop), wrote Private Louis Wilshaw (2nd battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers), “Omdurman was a picnic”,³⁵ and the “Tirah”, reflected Private H. Worth (2nd battalion Devonshire Regiment), “was nothing compared” with the operations involved in the relief of Ladysmith.³⁶ More positively, though, a Dargai veteran observed that “Wounded men can lie, as was the case in the retirement at Magersfontein, in the knowledge that they will receive the best treatment at the hands of their enemies, and not the ‘coup de grace’ as from the Afridis”. Rations, he added, were more regular than on the “frontier, or perhaps any former campaign”, and the home country had risen to the

-
- 28 Devonshire Regiment Museum, DD RHQ, Box 18, Tringham Mss, Lieut A M Tringham – his mother, 8 October 1899; to his father, 4 June 1900
- 29 BWRA, 0396/2, Mowbray Berkeley Mss, T Mowbray Berkeley – his mother, 27 November 1899; “Facing Death without a Tremor”, *Stroud Journal*, 18 May 1900, p 3; “A Weston-Super-Mare Constable with the Dragoons”, *Somerset County Gazette*, 21 April 1900, p 3
- 30 “Back from the Front A Wounded Halifax Reservist”, *Bradford Daily Argus*, 12 January 1900, p 4
- 31 “An Ashburton Man at Ladysmith”, *Mid-Devon and Newton Times*, 25 November 1899, p 3
- 32 “North Curry Man at Estcourt”, *Devon and Somerset Weekly News*, 15 February 1900, p 6
- 33 “Interesting Letter from a Bristolian”, *Bristol Observer*, 7 April 1900, p 4
- 34 “The Boer as a Fighting Man”, *North Devon Herald*, 15 March 1900, p 8
- 35 “Soldiers’ Letters”, *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 3 March 1900, p 3
- 36 “Newton Soldier’s Letter”, *Mid-Devon and Newton Times*, 10 March 1900, p 3

occasion: "In addition to the Queen's chocolate and other presents, we have to-day received McVitie & Price's present of Scotch oatcakes. Ye gods, it is enough to make old Peninsular or Crimean warriors turn in their graves."³⁷

The early defeats wrought internal changes as well as changes in external perceptions. The appointment of Lord Roberts as the new theatre commander, with Lord Kitchener as his chief of staff, heralded massive changes in the scale, organisation and tactics of the British army. All the resources of a vast empire were now brought to bear, with the Royal Navy ensuring that the Boers would not receive any foreign support while keeping men and supplies flowing to South Africa. When Roberts and Kitchener assembled their army corps for its advance on Bloemfontein, they had five divisions and a whole division of cavalry under Lieutenant-General John French, that is, 40 000 men and one hundred guns. More controversial was the centralisation of the transport arrangements, leaving the vast, slow-moving convoys vulnerable to ambush, as at Waterval Drift (15 February 1900), and the improvised creation of large numbers of Mounted Infantry units from all the regular battalions and new colonial corps. Douglas Haig, incensed about the diversion of scarce rations away from the cavalry to these "Colonial Skallywag Corps", described them as "quite useless" and mere "ruffians", who "can't ride & know nothing about their duties as mounted men. Roberts' Horse and Kitchener's Horse", he added, "are good only for looting and the greater part of them disappear the moment a shot is fired".³⁸

More constructive was the prompt issue by Lord Roberts of "Notes for Guidance in South African Warfare" (26 January 1900). These emphasised the need to avoid frontal attacks and use extended order, and underscored the need for operational and tactical change. Whether these notes reflected the legacy of his experience in India or were "a textbook summary of the advanced tactical ideas of the previous three decades",³⁹ they portended an adaptation in tactics and operational skills to address both the conditions, and the enemy, encountered in South Africa. Officers became more adept at devising, and their men at constructing, field defences; as soldiers adapted to the topographical and meteorological conditions, there were general improvements in marksmanship, use of cover and combined-arms operations.

Buller was certainly in the forefront of applying such changes when he breeched the Tugela defences, with his men using cover more effectively, advancing in rushes and their movements co-ordinated with creeping barrages of artillery. Of all the much-criticised commanders of "Black Week", Buller retained the greatest level of affection amongst his men. If Major-General William F. Gatacre retained some support after Stormberg and Lord Methuen had backing from his guardsmen, the latter lost the confidence of his highlanders after their heavy losses at Magersfontein, including the death of their esteemed brigadier, Major-General Andrew Wauchope. Even Methuen accepted that "the Highland Brigade will never wish to serve under me again" and Roberts removed the brigade under its new brigadier, Major-General

37 "A Gordon Highlander on Indian v African Warfare", *Edinburgh Evening News*, 15 March 1900, p 6

38 National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS), Haig Mss , Acc 3155, no 6, Major D Haig to Henrietta, 16 March 1900

39 Bailes, "Technology", p 46; Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, pp 250–2, 263–5, 314–16

Hector Macdonald, from his command.⁴⁰ Yet Buller, despite all his reverses in Natal and his critics in the press, remained a hugely popular commander. If his fellow Devonians were among the most supportive, many soldiers praised his personal bravery, his treatment of them in the field, his readiness to manoeuvre rather than press forward with costly attacks, and his ability to break through formidable defences and move across daunting terrain. Trooper Baker (5th Dragoon Guards) asserted that “General Buller is the man, and no doubt about it, for he has had no child’s play to deal with, and, what is more, he is trusted by his men”.⁴¹

Tactical flexibility only prevailed in northern Natal, and in the advance of Roberts upon Bloemfontein and Pretoria, because the commanders were able to bring to bear masses of guns and reinforcements from Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Logistical supply and continued support proved crucial, with the engineers profiting from the “period of inaction” (in effect, the operational passivity of the Boers)⁴² that followed the “check at all points” during the middle of December 1899.⁴³ As Lieutenant-Colonel Sir E.P.C. Girouard recalled, this “enabled supplies and railway material to be forwarded to the front; it gave time for the elaboration of the new organisation [of military control of the railways] and for the formation of the Field Railway Sections and Railway Pioneer Regiment”.⁴⁴ Accordingly when Roberts decided to change front and, in the greatest secrecy, rail his soldiers around to detrain between the Orange River and Modder River, he had both the railway and telegraph support to do so. “Approximately the total number of troops detrained between Orange River and Modder River between January 26th and February 12th 1900, was 30 000, with horses, mules, oxen, guns, and transport ... the largest troop move carried out by the railways during the campaign ...”⁴⁵ Although railways had their drawbacks in this campaign, producing predictable lines of advance that the enemy could break (more than 250 times in twelve months during the guerrilla phase), and requiring significant numbers of men to repair, maintain and protect them (a problem eventually solved by the blockhouse system), they still enabled the British to move large numbers of men over great distances. During nine days in February 1901, 9 000 men, 14 500 horses and mules, 373 trucks of oxen and wagons and 48 guns were despatched from Bloemfontein to De Aar and Naauwpoort in response to the invasion of Cape Colony. “This railing of troops”, claimed Girouard, “was naturally a great advantage to us over the enemy”.⁴⁶

40 Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office (hereafter WSRO), Methuen Mss., Lord Methuen – wife, 4 February 1900; “In Praise of General Gatacre”, *Dorset County Chronicle*, 18 January 1900, p 13; “A Kingston Man with Lord Methuen, Scarcity of Tobacco”, *Devon and Somerset Weekly News*, 1 March 1900; “Methuen and his Guards”, *Morning Leader*, 23 April 1900, p 2; Spiers, *Scottish Soldier*, p 167

41 “A Weston-Super-Mare Constable with the Dragoons”, *Somerset County Gazette*, 21 April 1900, p 3; “A Soldier in Defence of Buller”, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 21 May 1900, p 5; “A Perth Soldier Before Ladysmith”, *Perthshire Constitutional & Journal*, 2 April 1900, p 3; E M Spiers, *The Victorian Soldier in Africa* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2004), pp 164–165

42 E P C Girouard, *History of the Railways during the War in South Africa, 1899–1902* (HMSO, London, 1903), p 25

43 Girouard, *History of the Railways*, p 25

44 Girouard, *History of the Railways*, p 25

45 Girouard, *History of the Railways*, p 25

46 Girouard, *History of the Railways*, p 21; Van der Waag, “The Boer Military System”, p 53; Douglas Porch, *Wars of Empire* (Cassell, London, 2001), p 118

Mobility stretched beyond the use of the railways and had to address the key point that the cavalry arm had suffered from a lack of numbers initially and so had constrained operational movement. Methuen had clung to the railway because he lacked sufficient mounted men to outflank the enemy. His heavily laden cavalry (the 9th Lancers) could not manoeuvre in a ferociously hot climate with limited sources of water. As he informed Sir Frederick Stephenson, “on horses the Boers could always reach any given point quicker than my men”.⁴⁷ All British mounted units depended on remounts of variable quality, and on supplies of forage and water that were sometimes late in arrival and the cavalry had to share these with mounted infantry and the various bodies of irregular horse. As Badsey emphasises, the original mounted infantry (MI), like the regular cavalry, had to adapt to South African conditions and their ten-week pre-war training hardly sufficed to produce good horsemen. The same applied to the corps of mounted infantry hastily formed by Lord Roberts; they knew nothing of riding and horses at first,⁴⁸ and had to be thrown into action precipitately. Willing to accept heavy losses of horseflesh, Roberts concentrated about 8 000 cavalry and MI under French to undertake the relief of Kimberley (15 February 1900), and then by pushing a brigade forward, to cut off General Piet Cronjé’s forces at Paardeberg (17 February 1900).⁴⁹

These successes, though, barely masked the more fundamental shortcoming in standards of horsemastership. These deficiencies in the care and treatment of horses recurred throughout the long conflict, conducted over an immense and often inhospitable terrain. Pre-war standards of training, which focused more upon stable management than care of horses in the field, hardly helped. Psychological attitudes exacerbated this failing, namely the contrast between cavalrymen being reluctant to be seen off the backs of their horses compared with the readiness of gunners to remain dismounted for as long as possible to preserve teams of fit horses for rapid deployment in action. Finally, the vast numbers of remounts only encouraged the neglect of horses, weakened after lengthy sea voyages, inadequate periods of time for rest and acclimatisation and the ravages of African horse sickness, particularly at lower altitudes in the wet months. Lacking a properly staffed, funded and motivated Remounts Department, the British “expended” 400 346 horses, mules and donkeys during the war. As Driver G. Harrison wrote, “The horses are dropping down like dead sheep every day as they can’t stand the heat, but we have got our full amount of horses as they keep sending them on.”⁵⁰

Despite these difficulties the British soldier would adapt and learn from prolonged exposure to South African conditions. If one notable account of Tommy Atkins dwells upon evidence of his drinking, looting, whoring, periodic flight in battle

47 WSRO, 1742, Methuen Mss., Methuen – Stephenson, 13 December 1899

48 Capt Rodolph Adlercron (Cameron Highlanders) treated horses by pouring a bottle of whisky down their throats: Highlanders Museum, “Autobiography of Donald Dickson Farmer”, p 8

49 Badsey, “British Cavalry Doctrine”, pp 89–90

50 “Soldiers’ Beards a Foot Long”, *Stroud Journal*, 23 March 1900, p 3; Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, pp 318–320; Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry 1816–1919*, 8 vols (Leo Cooper, London, 1973–97), IV, pp 363–364; PP, Minutes of Evidence Supplied to the *Elgin Commission*, q 19299 and Appendix E, “Notes on Remount Operations by Colonel T Deane”, pp 586–589; Lord Kitchener – Brodrick, 29 November 1901 in A Wessels (ed), *Lord Kitchener and the War in South Africa 1899–1902* (Sutton Publishing for the Army Records Society, Stroud, 2006), p 172

and “unflagging” desire to return home,⁵¹ the multitude of letters sent home paint a more rounded picture. For all their flaws, British soldiers were resilient, with their morale boosted by the military successes in relieving the besieged towns, victories at Paardeberg (27 February 1900) and Brandwater Basin (30 July 1900) and the capture of the Boer capitals. They took pride in their operational successes; writing from Bloemfontein, Corporal G.W. White (2nd battalion, Gloucester regiment) observed “it is a credit to Great Britain the way the operations were carried out, and in such a short time; and not only to the country, but to Lord Roberts and the men under him”.⁵² Private Tom Wood (2nd battalion, Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry) agreed: “We are nothing but a bundle of rags now ... [but] I have the utmost confidence in Lord Roberts (‘Little Bobs’, the men call him)”.⁵³ They revelled in regimental triumphs: after Elandslaagte, Devonians claimed that their regiment gained “a very good name, better than the Gordons did at Dargai”.⁵⁴ Some were impressed, too, by the 30 000 volunteers from the self-governing colonies: “I had no idea of the greatness of the British Empire until I came out here”, wrote Wood, “It is surprising to see men here from all parts of the world, always ready to uphold the Union Jack.”⁵⁵

The capture of Boer prisoners boosted morale still further. “Poor old Cronje”, wrote Sapper R. Gomer, “heard ‘How about Majuba?’ a good many times on the day of his capture,”⁵⁶ but meeting Boer prisoners as they arrived in their thousands at Cape Town altered perceptions of the enemy: “They seemed a very decent lot of men”, observed a Cornwall soldier, and “seemed very glad to be taken prisoners, as they were thoroughly sick of the war”.⁵⁷ Generally attitudes changed after battles by those who met the enemy whether as captured British soldiers in Pretoria or in the assistance proffered to British stretcher bearers (offered cigars, cigarettes and “plenty of water” after Spion Kop)⁵⁸ or in attitudes to the fallen in battle. After Spion Kop, Reverend Reginald F. Collins talked with Boers during the process of identifying the dead and digging graves, and reported their “total absence of anything like exultation ... Far from it, there was a sadness, almost anguish, in the way that they referred to our fallen soldiers ... Again and again, I will add, they expressed their admiration for the bravery of our men.”⁵⁹

Not all first impressions were positive, though. British officers were appalled to find women and children in the Boer trenches at Paardeberg: “Pretty barbarous taking women into such a place”, commented Captain Charles E. Stewart (2nd

51 W Nasson, “Tommy Atkins in South Africa”, in P Warwick (ed), *The South African War; The Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* (Longman, London, 1980), pp 123–138

52 “War Letters”, *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 28 April 1900, p 3

53 “We Will Make the Name of the Cornwalls Ring”, *Devon and Somerset Weekly News*, 17 May 1900, p 6

54 “Crediton Man in the Fighting”, *Crediton Chronicle*, 25 November 1899, p 5; “Crediton Private at the Front”, *Crediton Chronicle*, 2 December 1899, p 5

55 “A Tauntonian in the DCLI”, *Somerset County Gazette*, 25 August 1900, p 3; D Judd and K Surridge, *The Boer War* (John Murray, London, 2002), p 76

56 “The Work of the Royal Engineers”, *North Devon Herald*, 5 April 1900, p 2

57 “Letters from the Front”, *Western Morning News*, 16 January 1900, p 8; “Newton Man in the Naval Brigade which Saved Ladysmith”, *Mid-Devon and Newton Times*, 16 June 1900, p 8

58 “The Gloucesters at Pretoria”, *Devon Weekly Times*, 15 December 1899, p 7; “Incidents of the Campaign”, *Daily Press* (Aberdeen), 28 February 1900, p 7

59 “Boers and British on Spion Kop”, *North British Daily Mail*, 2 March 1900, p 2; A Wessels, “Afrikaners at War”, in J Gooch (ed), *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image* (Frank Cass, London, 2000), pp 73–106, at p 93

battalion, Black Watch), and there were reports of prisoner mistreatment or near mistreatment, especially when Boers were captured in the vicinity of explosive bullets.⁶⁰ Above all, relations with most Boer women remained fraught throughout the war. In certain respects this was perfectly understandable as the meetings (other than rare instances of rape) largely occurred during the occupations of towns, the burning of farms, and later the internment of Boer women and children. More fundamentally, as an officer reflected towards the end of the war, “the Boer women are the crux of the whole question. They loathe us, and the first thing they teach their children is to hate the British”.⁶¹

These impressionistic thoughts were possibly less important than the creeping realisation that the capture of the Boer capitals had not brought about a cessation of the fighting. Faced with the “hit-and-run” tactics of the Boer commandos, led by Christiaan de Wet, Louis Botha and Koos de la Rey, British soldiers expressed all manner of fatigue and frustration. “It is sickening work”, wrote Captain Archibald Cameron, “this tramping after De Wet, who takes care never to be within 50 miles of us ...” and, in subsequent letters, he added: “The only way I can see to end the War is to offer C. De Wet £20 000 a year & the command of all our British Cavalry, except that I don’t suppose he would condescend to command such a set of blighted idiots ...”. The main exception was the recently arrived Lovat Scouts, who were “equal to the best mounted troops out here; they understand how to use their eyes & telescopes & scouting comes natural to them & their officers ...”.⁶² Raising specialist companies of scouts (30 per cent of whom were stalkers or their sons) for scouting missions (as in the Lovat Scouts) was evidence of British adaptation to the peculiarities of the war; so too was the despatch of Imperial Yeomanry units. Not all of these bodies impressed, especially some of the later detachments, but by April 1901, Sergeant J. Easton (Royal Scots MI) paid a handsome tribute to the “Scottish Yeomanry” from the initial contingent which has “been continually on the trek after De Wet this last six months, with never a single day’s rest. They have a splendid way of working, and seem to be better disciplined than the majority”.⁶³ Generally, mounted infantry found that they had “never much rest”, that they were “nearly roasted in the day”, and that they had “to keep on all the time”, but, as Private Stinchcombe (a Cornish MI) added, “you have to stick it”.⁶⁴

Dogged determination, albeit laced with humour and esprit de corps, characterised the response of British soldiers to this phase of the war, and this was not the exclusive preserve of front-line forces. The Royal Engineers performed prodigious feats throughout the war, not least the 12th Company that marched over 800 miles in six months, advancing often in front of the army, preparing roads, drifts, bridges, joining the firing line where necessary, as they struggled through to Komati Poort. The terminus was supposedly “the white man’s grave”, wrote Sapper C. Bowden, but the engineers kept “building huts and making roads with the heat 110 degrees in the

60 Bwra, 196, Captain C E Stewart diary, 27 February 1900 and 23 March 1900; “Letters from the War”, *Manchester Evening News*, 16 January 1900, p 5

61 “Interesting Letter from the Front”, *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 5 April 1902, p 8; F Pretorius, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902* (Struik, Cape Town, 1998), pp 37–38

62 Bwra, 186, Captain A Cameron – father, 30 June; Nellie, 18 July; Tina, 10 July 1900

63 “Interesting Letter from South Africa”, *Ayr Observer*, 14 May 1901, p 4

64 “Mounted Infantry Everywhere”, *Morning Leader*, 17 April 1900, p 2

shade all through the fever months”.⁶⁵ Of course there was grumbling and plenty of evidence that soldiers wanted to go home yet this turned in many cases to deep resentment against anyone who was thwarting this outcome.

The targets were first and foremost the Boers, not so much for their periodic successes but those practices on the battlefield (or reports of such practices) that had always incensed British soldiers, namely the abuse of the white flag, reports of firing on ambulance wagons displaying Red Cross emblems, and latterly evidence of the mistreatment and shooting of unarmed blacks caught working for the British. Scots may not have been alone in favouring reprisals.⁶⁶ Secondly, many favoured a more vigorous prosecution of the war, deploring the leniency of policies pursued initially by Lord Roberts in allowing Boer prisoners to go free under oath. The Reverend James Robertson, chaplain to the Highland Brigade, advocated making the war “more dreadful ... [as] the only way to stop it”.⁶⁷ Accordingly, many soldiers interpreted the farm burning and livestock destruction policies, begun under Roberts and continued under Kitchener, in a fiercely pragmatic way. If many found these actions profoundly distasteful, some enjoyed the task or claimed that the Boers had brought the reprisals upon themselves after their destruction of English homesteads. Once the removal of these families and many blacks to internment camps began, Sergeant Hamilton (HLI) recognised that the “One thing in our favour is the clearing off the people. This move has destroyed their principal means of intelligence”.⁶⁸ Similarly, many soldiers resented the criticism of the camps, claiming that the Boers therein were being treated better “than our men in the field and probably better than many of our men’s wives at home”.⁶⁹ If some blamed the death rates on the unsanitary habits of Boer women, the criticisms of Miss Emily Hobhouse were resented primarily because they came to represent the pro-Boer critique of the war at home. Soldiers deplored the latter as giving comfort to the enemy and so prolonging the conflict. A Black Watch private may have been more committed than most but, in responding to a pro-Boer letter in the *Glasgow Herald*, he described a reported Boer outrage towards a Basotho woman before affirming

I am glad we have such men as Chamberlain at the head of affairs in colonial matters We are fighting for the freedom of our own flesh and blood, and, thank God, we have not fought in vain We have freed the natives – i e , Basutos and Kaffirs from a state of almost slavery ... such [pro-Boer] writers only tend to prolong the war instead of finishing it⁷⁰

65 “From East London to Komati Poort”, *North Devon Herald*, 23 May 1901, p 3
 66 Gordon Highlanders Museum, PB174, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir N Macready, diary, p 127; “A Tauntonian at Kroonstadt”, *Somerset County Gazette*, 20 July 1901, p 12; “More About Tweefontein”, *Glasgow Evening News*, 29 January 1902, p 6; and E M Spiers, “The Scottish Soldier in the Boer War”, in Gooch (ed), *The Boer War*, pp 152–165 at p 156
 67 “Chaplain of the Highland Brigade on How to Deal with the Boers”, *Perthshire Constitutional & Journal*, 9 July 1900, p 3; A Hunter, *Kitchener’s Sword-Arm: The Life and Campaigns of General Sir Archibald Hunter* (Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1996), p 149
 68 “Letter from the Front”, *Argyllshire Herald*, 6 April 1901, p 3; National Army Museum, 1983-05-97, W Grant diary, 23 July 1901; Argyll/Sutherland Highlanders Museum, N-D4 CUN B , Capt B A Cunningham diary, 29 December 1900 and N-D1 MacD , Private J MacDonald diary, p 13; BWRA 196, Stewart diary, 3 July 1900; Spiers, *Scottish Soldier*, pp 192–193
 69 “A Notable Letter from the Front”, *Ross-shire Journal*, 21 March 1902, p 5; “The Boer Refugees ‘Better Treated than our own Men’”, *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 26 July 1901, p 8
 70 “A Soldier on Pro-Boers”, *Ayr Advertiser*, 5 September 1901, p 7; “Medical Work in Boer Camps”, *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 21 September 1901, p 8; “Concentration Camps”, *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 16 January 1902; “At the Front”, *Argyllshire Herald*, 9 November 1901

Such resolve was given more focus by the steady improvement in scouting and intelligence collection. British field intelligence had been abject at the start of the war, with Lieutenant-Colonel Archibald Murray forced to raise a Natal corps of guides (45 local Europeans and 50 blacks) and Major Michael F. Rimington, raising a similar body, known as “Rimington’s Guides”, in the Cape Colony. Lack of accurate intelligence was clearly apparent in many of the early reverses of the war. The changes heralded by the use of a deception plan, prepared by Colonel G.F.A. Henderson, to assist French in his relief of Kimberley and the launch of Roberts’ advance on Bloemfontein, would be followed with much more attention paid to intelligence collection. After the onset of the guerrilla war, the British decentralised their intelligence activities to four principal districts and sub-districts, with a staff officer in charge of each district. The staff officer duly passed local information, often gathered initially by colonial units, on to columns chasing the Boers with maps, guides, scouts and interpreters.⁷¹

Improvisation was common at first as Haig experienced when he assumed his intelligence responsibilities in the central district of the Cape Colony (January 1901). Finding that there was not an organised system of intelligence, he hired farmers, local men and blacks to act as scouts and spies. “With but few exceptions”, he reported, “all have acted with great courage; several have passed right through the enemy’s lines and brought me news which could have been obtained by no other means”.⁷² Yet using such information in the field was bedevilled by problems of communication and co-ordination, and hence the importance of attaching bodies like the Lovat Scouts to flying columns. Compared with the heavily laden cavalry units deployed at the outset of the war, the Lovat Scouts as described by Trooper J. Mackenzie,

carry all our stores on pack mules, which is much handier, as we have a great deal of work to do in the mountains. When we are shifting from one place to another, we very often do it in the night ... and very often we have to climb very high mountains, leading our horses ...⁷³

As scouts had to be as mobile, resourceful and adept in the field as the Boers themselves, the British also employed an increasing number of Boer “joiners”. Private C.A. Oke (1st battalion, King’s Royal Rifle Corps, 4th division Mounted Infantry), writing from an “advanced post in the Transvaal”, described how

We have plenty of Boers in this town – surrendered of course, and they form a corps of “burger scouts”, and do a lot of scouting for columns. It seems peculiar to think that these chaps will fight on our side now. At any rate, they get good pay (10s to 15s a day), and I suppose that has a lot to do with it.⁷⁴

-
- 71 The Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), WO 32/8812, Lieutenant-Colonel D. Henderson, “Report on Field Intelligence from 29 November 1900 until the Cessation of Hostilities”, 13 June 1902; E. M. Spiers, “Intelligence and Command in Britain’s Small Colonial Wars of the 1890s”, *Intelligence and National Security*, 22, 5, 2007, pp 661–681
- 72 NLS, A3155, no 38g, Haig Mss, “Report on Operations Carried Out by Columns under the Command of Colonel D. Haig in the Central District of Cape Colony between the Sneeuwberg Mountains & Mossel Bay”, 1 January–21 February 1901
- 73 “With the Lovat Scouts”, *North Star*, 27 March 1902, p 5; M. L. Melville, *The Story of the Lovat Scouts 1900–1980* (Librario Publishing, Kinloss, 2004), chapters 2–4
- 74 “Experiences at the Front”, *Cornish Guardian*, 30 August 1901, p 3; for a detailed study see A. M. Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason: Boer Collaboration in the South African War of 1899–1902* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006)

Although burghers had acted as guides as early as June 1900, their numbers and significance grew as the guerrilla war developed until they numbered 5 464 by 31 May 1902 (compared to some 20 000 “bitter-enders” who remained in the field). The joiners not only served individually as scouts and guides but also formed irregular corps and from October 1901 onwards served in regular units: the National Scouts and Orange River Volunteers. So effective were the Scouts in the Transvaal that General L.J. Meyer complained at the final peace negotiations: “We have taught the British how to wage war. Our own people are with them, and show them how to trek in the night, and where the footpaths are.”⁷⁵

In a further dimension of the “learning curve”, British forces increasingly utilised the services of blacks in direct military support. Having always used them as labourers, messengers, guides, and drivers of bullock-drawn wagons across country, they also employed them as scouts and as armed auxiliaries. The role of blacks in a supposedly “white man’s” war was of course peculiarly sensitive but Sergeant William McLanachan recognised that “The blacks play a very prominent part on both sides as scouts and carrying the news. They do it for us for gold. They do it for the Boers for the sjambok (as their backs show by marks)”.⁷⁶ The black scouts still required skilled leadership in the field, as supplied by the rugged Uitlander, Colonel Aubrey Woolls-Sampson in the Eastern Transvaal. By organising a team of well-mounted black scouts, he despatched a series of night-raiding parties across the region in late 1901 to gather intelligence over short distances, usually over radii of 25 miles at a time. Thereafter Woolls-Sampson debriefed his scouts thoroughly and provided timely information for columns under Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Henry Rawlinson and Major-General Bruce Hamilton. These columns rounded up several significant “bags” of Boers in December 1901. Hamilton later claimed that “it is not too much to say that we broke the Boer resistance in the Eastern Transvaal”.⁷⁷ If improved intelligence hardly determined the outcome of the war in itself, it certainly enabled the army to function more effectively in decentralised and increasingly diverse operations. By the end of the war, the intelligence staff had surveyed 13 360 square miles, and in the last six months of the war, had killed 88 and captured 550 of the enemy. By the signing of the peace, the intelligence service numbered 132 officers and 2 321 white subordinates and claimed that they had secured a “very large proportion of the [enemy] surrenderers”.⁷⁸

Finally, in completing this concept of a “learning curve” was the re-organisation of the army in the field to fight a protracted counter-insurgency war. Kitchener’s blockhouse system, designed originally to protect the railways, evolved

75 J D Kestell and DE van Velden, *The Peace Negotiations* (Richard Clay & Sons, London, 1912), p 179; PRO, CO 417/362/9, “Return of Ex Burghers Serving under British for Week Ending 1st June 1902”; A Grundlingh, “Collaborators in Boer Society”, in Warwick (ed), *The South African War*, pp 258–278 at pp 264–265, 270–271

76 “Ayrshire Yeomanry in South Africa”, *Ayr Observer*, 15 February 1901, p 3; W R Nasson, “Moving Lord Kitchener; Black Military Transport and Supply Work in the South African War, 1899–1902”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11, 1, 1984, pp 25–51

77 V Sampson and I Hamilton, *Anti-Commando* (Faber & Faber, London, 1931), pp 143–144, 149–150; Pakenham, *Boer War*, p 540; P Warwick, “Black People and the War”, in Warwick (ed), *The South African War*, pp 186–209

78 PRO, WO 32/8812, Henderson, “Report on Field Intelligence”; Spiers, “Intelligence and Command in Britain’s Small Colonial Wars”, p 677

into a major operational system by which the British sought to limit the enemy's freedom of manoeuvre and add to the "bags" of killed and captured Boers. The 8 000 small blockhouses roughly constructed about a mile apart along the railways, joined by 3 700 miles of barbed wire and equipped with telegraphs, telephones and various traps and alarms, both supported and served to maximise the effects of British mounted operations across a vast theatre of war, now effectively divided into sections. The system complemented the scorched-earth policy as a means of hampering the Boers, and consummated the trend of splitting up of former brigades, like the Highland Brigade, and even regiments into flying columns and companies dispersed to protect towns, depots, bridges and convoys. Subdividing the smaller units enabled detachments, usually an NCO and six or seven men to man each blockhouse and mount nightly patrols along the railway, while mounted columns continued to drive the Boers between the blockhouse lines.⁷⁹

Dubbed "cruelly dull and monotonous" work, which provided variable experiences depending upon the location of the blockhouse along the line,⁸⁰ soldiers appreciated that the system enabled them to remain in the field, regularly supplied with food, water and ammunition (attacks on the railway petered out by October 1901). If the drives rarely "bagged" as many Boers as Kitchener hoped, and mobile columns met with adversity, notably at Blood River Poort (17 September 1901), Bakenlaagte (30 October 1901) and the battles of Yzerspruit (once known as Tweefontein, 25 December 1901) and Tweebosch (7 March 1902), they had successes, capturing 778 burghers, 25 000 cattle, 2 000 horses and 200 wagons at Lang Riet (28 February 1902) and repulsing a Boer charge at Rooiwal (11 April 1902). Whereas the British could replace their losses of men and matériel, the Boers were less able to do so, particularly in respect of manpower and horses, and so could not exploit their successes. British morale was boosted not only by recurrent "bags" of prisoners but also by the sight of an enemy in an increasingly destitute state.⁸¹

The British army, in short, found ways of adapting to the peculiar conditions of the war that developed in South Africa. Yet this adaptation received relatively little recognition at the time. Contemporary interest in the war waned after the capture of the Boer capitals, the drive to Koomatipoort (24 September 1900), and the ending of the semi-conventional phase of operations. By the time that Lord Roberts returned to a hero's welcome in London (3 January 1901),⁸² most of the principal reporters, other than Bennett Burleigh of the *Daily Telegraph* and Edgar Wallace of the *Daily Mail*, had left South Africa and coverage of the guerrilla phase was left largely to Reuters

79 H Bailes, "Military Aspects of The War", in Warwick (ed), *The South African War*, pp 65–102 at pp 97–98; W Porter and C M Watson, *History of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, 3 vols (Longmans, London, 1889–1915), III, p 126

80 "Life in a Blockhouse on the Orange River", *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, 3, 3/4, 1901, p 683; "An Ilchester Reservist's Experience in a Blockhouse", *Devon and Somerset Weekly News*, 2 January 1902, p 7; "A Bridgwater Soldier's Letter", *Devon and Somerset Weekly News*, 6 February 1902, p 2; E M Spiers, "The British Army in South Africa: Military Government and Occupation, 1877–1914", in P B Boyden, A J Guy and M Harding (eds), *Ashes and Blood: The British Army in South Africa 1795–1914* (National Army Museum, London, 1999), pp 72–84 at p 83

81 Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp 530–532, 537–538, 540, 544–550, 556–560; A Lynch, "The Diary of an Ex-Cameronian", *Covenanter*, 1940, pp 103–104

82 A Wessels (ed), *Lord Roberts and the War in South Africa 1899–1902* (Sutton for the Army Records Society, Stroud, 2000), pp 93, 150

and the other news agencies.⁸³ Provincial newspapers still printed the letters from soldiers, especially volunteers describing their novel experiences, but the reportage was desultory and interest in how the war was being fought (other than the controversy over the “methods of barbarism” as depicted by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman⁸⁴) paled by comparison with the desire to see the war ended. Nor was the military wholly convinced that all the lessons being learned in South Africa would meet the demands for army reform. While the war was undoubtedly a catalyst for the wholesale reform of the higher defence organisation, the front-line and auxiliary forces, and their support services, reformers were selective in their choice of lessons.⁸⁵ Few envisaged that all the requirements needed to prevail in a counter-guerrilla war, conducted over a vast expanse of terrain in the peculiar local and atmospheric conditions of South Africa would underpin reforms. Improved skills in scouting, reconnaissance and the use of the ground would become features of post-war training but mounted infantry, a large field intelligence service, and a capacity to manage and maintain large-scale railway operations would not.⁸⁶ Just as the British army emerged from the Great War, having learned how to breakthrough German trenches but never intended to fight in a similar way again, so British and imperial forces had prevailed in South Africa but not by methods that would be used in Flanders in 1914.

The “learning curve” in South Africa had its roots in the resilience of the British soldier, the resolve of his leadership, and the provision of ample resources, including imperial support. Blessed with political backing, the army had reorganised itself in the field and learned how to protect its lengthy and vulnerable lines of communication, how to improve its intelligence, and how to exploit local sources of manpower. Unable to win the war by a major encounter battle, the British had settled for a dogged strategy of undermining the enemy’s will to resist by eroding his base of support, by reducing his fighting power, and by trying to counter him in the field. By 28 May 1901, Roland Schikkerling, a Boer on commando, recognised how far the British methods of fighting, a key aspect of the “learning curve”, had evolved:

The enemy is adopting our methods of fighting At one time it was said an Englishman is like a chicken He retires at sunset, and nothing need be feared from him after dark Now, however, he is making night raids all over the country, and practising our own stratagems upon us⁸⁷

If the British army was going to prevail against a determined enemy, operating across a vast expanse of terrain, it had to be ruthless, pragmatic, and, above all, it had to learn.

-
- 83 S Badsey, “The Boer War as a Media War”, in Dennis & Grey, *The Boer War*, p 82
- 84 “National Reform Union”, *Scotsman*, 15 June 1901, p 10; Spiers, *Scottish Soldier*, pp 182–202; S M Miller, *Volunteers on the Veld: Britain’s Citizen-Soldiers and the South African War, 1899–1902* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2007)
- 85 E M Spiers, “Between the South African War and the First World War, 1902–14”, in H Strachan (ed), *Big Wars and Small Wars: The British Army and the Lessons of War in the Twentieth Century* (Routledge, London and New York, 2006), pp 21–35
- 86 On the demise of mounted infantry, see Badsey, “British Cavalry Doctrine”, p 95; ending field intelligence, see T G Fergusson, *British Military Intelligence, 1870–1914* (Univ Publications of America, Frederick, 1984), pp 166–167; and rejection of a peacetime railway department, see W Salmond, Minutes of Evidence, *Elgin Commission*, Cd 1789 (1904), XL, qs 2119–21
- 87 R W Schikkerling, *Commando Courageous (A Boer’s Diary)* (Hugh Kearthland, Johannesburg, 1964), p 207

Abstract

The British military performance in the South African War not only confounded pre-war expectations but also aroused controversy about what had caused the underestimation of a well-armed, mobile enemy and the failure to anticipate the tactical challenges posed by fire zones, swept by smokeless magazine rifles. Although the sweeping criticisms of Leo Amery, which held sway for over 70 years, have been modified by more recent historiography, this essay uses the correspondence of British soldiers to argue that the British victory was not simply a product of numerical superiority and an ability to deny any foreign intervention on behalf of the Boers. It claims that the British army, and its much-maligned soldiery, proved resilient and adaptable in South Africa, capable of learning in the field, and of conducting counter-guerrilla operations across a vast terrain in a way that would ultimately undermine the enemy's will to resist. While the more perceptive Boers recognised that the British had improved in their field craft and tactical skills neither the British press, disenchanted with a protracted war, nor the military themselves, valued this learning process inasmuch as the war seemed to be largely anomalous with only limited lessons for the future.

Opsomming

Die leerkurwe in die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog: Die soldate se perspektiewe

Die Britse militêre vertoning in die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog het nie alleen vooroorlogse verwagtinge beskaam nie, maar ook dispuut ontlok oor wat gelei het tot die onderskatting van 'n goed bewapende, mobiele vyand en die versuim om die taktiese uitdagings te voorsien wat gestel is deur vuursones, bestryk deur rooklose magasyngewere. Ofskoon die felle kritiek van Leo Amery wat vir meer as 70 jaar oorheers het deur meer onlangse historiografie versag is, benut hierdie artikel die korrespondensie van Britse soldate om te argumenteer dat die Britse oorwinning nie bloot die gevolg was van 'n getalle-oorwig en die vermoë om enige buitelandse tussenkoms namens die Boere te verhoed nie. Dit voer aan dat die Britse leër en sy veel beswadderde krygsvolk 'n veerkragtigheid en aanpasbaarheid in Suid-Afrika getoon het, en dat hulle daartoe in staat was om in die veld te leer, en om teen-guerrilla operasies uit te voer oor 'n wye terrein en op 'n manier wat uiteindelik die vyand se wil om weerstand te bied sou ondergrawe. Terwyl die meer opmerklike Boere besef het dat die Britte in hul vermoë in die veld en met hul taktiese vaardighede verbeter het, het nóg die Britse pers – ontnugter deur 'n uitgerekte oorlog – nóg die militêre self hierdie leerkurwe na waarde geskat, in so verre die oorlog as grootliks anomaal met slegs beperkte lesse vir die toekoms beskou is.

Keywords

British army; learning curve; army reform; South African War; counter-guerrilla operations.

Slutelwoorde

Britse leër; leerkurwe; militêre hervorming; Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog; teen-guerrilla operasies.